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FOR NEA/FO (WELCH AND GRAY), NEA/MAG (HOPKINS AND HARRIS)  
NSC FOR ABRAMS AND YERGER

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PMIL](#) [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ETRD](#) [EINV](#) [TS](#)  
SUBJECT: A/S WELCH DISCUSSES BILATERAL AND REGIONAL ISSUES  
WITH GOT COUNTERPARTS, INTELLECTUALS

REF: A. TUNIS 194  
[1](#)B. TUNIS 193

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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Summary  
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[1](#)1. (S/NF) In exchanges with the Minister of Defense and the Minister of Development and International Cooperation on February 28, A/S Welch underscored US commitment to advancing mutual interests in the respective areas of defense and counter-terrorism cooperation, and increasing bilateral trade and investment. A/S Welch also took advantage of his meeting with the DefMin to press for better CT cooperation on a specific case involving a terrorist in Tunisian custody. At a dinner gathering with intellectuals and members of civil society the previous evening, Welch provided a tour d'horizon of the region, while dinner guests offered constructive criticism about US Middle East policies. Participants also raised the domestic political situation in Tunisia including their concerns about increased corruption. End Summary.

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FMF, CT Cooperation  
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[1](#)2. (C) In a 45-minute meeting on February 28, Minister of National Defense Kamel Morjane exchanged views on bilateral issues and regional developments with NEA A/S Welch, who was accompanied by Ambassador, Executive Assistant to the Deputy National Security Advisor, ODC Chief, NEA Staff Asst, and Pol/Econ Couns. On the bilateral front, A/S Welch took up the issue of the decreased amount for Foreign Military Financing (FMF) for Tunisia, explaining that the Administration would continue to be "entrepreneurial" in its efforts to locate alternative sources of funding to help the GOT address the emerging threat of al-Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), as we have been in the current fiscal year. Repeating a formulation he used with Congressman Cramer, DefMin Morjane noted that he had promised himself not to raise this issue. While he understood the budgetary pressure the USG is facing, he said he could not help looking at the issue from a Tunisian optic. For Tunisia, he continued, \$10 million will make or break the military's capacity to control its borders; for the United States, he countered, such a sum is "not fundamental." Concluding, he committed that, regardless of the FMF levels, the bilateral relationship would remain important to Tunisia in all fields, from defense to foreign policy.

[1](#)3. (S/NF) Welch underscored that the upcoming Joint Military

Commission in Washington will provide an opportunity for the Tunisian side to demonstrate that it is being helpful, including in its responsiveness to US requests for coordination on counter-terrorism (CT) issues. Morjane noted that responsibility for CT coordination is not limited to just his ministry. Welch agreed, pointing out that there have been instances in which the coordination process with another agency had been problematic. He cited the slow and incomplete sharing of information relating to the December 2006/January 2007 take-down of a terror cell that reportedly planned to attack the US and UK Embassies and personnel, as well as an ongoing specific case in which the USG is seeking access to Tunisian terrorist Nouredine Taam. Drawing a stark comparison between the lack of cooperation of the Tunisian authorities to the much more forthcoming posture of its neighboring states on such matters, Welch remarked, "We shouldn't have to ask friends for this kind of assistance. It should have been volunteered already." (Note: Additional details Ref B and in GRPO channels.)

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Previewing Trade Talks  
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14. (C) Meeting with Minister of Development and International Cooperation Mohamed Nouri Jouini, A/S Welch and Ambassador Godec previewed the bilateral Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) council that will take place in Tunis March 10-11. They underscored the US commitment to reducing trade barriers and improving bilateral trade and investment, even in the absence of "fast track" authority to pursue a free trade agreement (FTA). Expressing pleasure with the "new-found momentum" behind the TIFA process, Jouini made clear that Tunisia is "keen" to have an FTA with the United States. Explaining foreign trade constitutes the equivalent

of 100 percent of Tunisia's GDP, he noted that the Tunisian economy is very exposed to international economic fluctuations and that it is imperative that it diversify its trading partners.

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Intellectuals Offer Their Take  
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15. (C) Over dinner with intellectuals and members of civil society, A/S Welch shared with his interlocutors the US perspective on regional developments. There was particular interest in the Israeli-Palestinian situation, with participants voicing criticism over Israeli actions in the Gaza Strip. They also expressed skepticism about the chances of finding a solution by the end of the current calendar year. They took Welch's point, however, that it is preferable to try to reach a settlement. They also appeared relieved to learn that the negotiations track is progressing, albeit behind closed doors. The dinner also saw lively discussion about the domestic political situation in Tunisia.

At first, this took the guise of a discussion about developments in Algeria, since Welch had just arrived from Algiers. In this context, several participants expressed concern about the likelihood of President Bouteflika seeking a constitutional amendment to allow him a third term. Others noted the absence of freedom of expression in Algeria. Finally, one dinner guest asked, "Why are we talking about Algeria?" to which another added, "Are we talking about Algeria?" Dinner participants were frank about the increasing phenomenon of corruption in Tunisia. They also shared personal experiences relating to the absence of freedom of expression.

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Comment  
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16. (C) A/S Welch was able to interact with a broad range of interlocutors during his visit to Tunisia. His frank words with the DefMin helped tee up his discussion of CT cooperation with President Ben Ali. In the case of dinner

with intellectuals and civil society representatives, Welch was able to hear a perspective on Tunisian developments that is not often given voice in this society. All of these interactions were well received. End Comment.

17. (U) A/S Welch did not have a chance to clear this cable.

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